

Memo to JL

July 17, 1968

Luncheon discussion with William L. Rivers

I had arranged our meeting on the strength of his book "The Opinion Makers", which I had read with very great interest.

I had sent Rivers a sprinkling of my columns for his prior familiarization. He was quite commendatory, in fact, astonished that a scientist could write so clearly for the educated layman. The material, in his view, was free from jargon and generally of great human interest. He was particularly enthusiastic about the more biologically oriented columns, I think partly because this is the area he was able to learn the most about, and I suppose some of it simply reflects the area of my own greatest competence and expertise. He mentioned that in many places he constantly expected me to drift off into rather over-specialized and jargonistic treatments, only to discover that I really had an important human point in mind, and would soon dust it off and bring it to view. Some figures of speech were particularly striking and he mentions this as being an important goal of the columns, to provide slogans. The one that he carried away with him was the notion of American bombers illuminating the Viet Nameese landscape. He very soon and spontaneously volunteered to use his own efforts to assure wider distribution of the column; in fact, he was urging me to write more frequently, and that he had connections with the Publishers Hall syndicate that could insure such distribution. I indicated that I found once a week quite sufficient, but in any case he is going to try to make some overtures to the Los Angeles Times, which we agreed was by far the best paper in this part of the world. I did have some very direct questions, but I found it a bit difficult to formulate them. However, I will simply recite some of his answers.

He was concerned about the diffusion of a column that appears just once a week, that very few readers will have attended closely enough to be able to follow at all from one time to the next. He thought that for this reason it would be very advisable to stick to a given issue quite doggedly for as much as ten or fifteen weeks at a time. The reader is not going to judge this the same way that I do; he doesn't spend seven days from one article to another thinking about its present and future content. The one issue that he felt was the great one of our time was race. This was one of the reasons he was interested in what I had to say about human biology. He accepted that the somewhat oblique approach that I sometimes adopted was appropriate, although he thought I should be more explicit about its connection with the race issue. Again, I am a little puzzled to know how personal a view this is, and it would be very interesting if there were any way I could to sample some other people on this kind of issue. He had no criticism to make of my more political contributions; it might be fair to say that they were not much better than the bulk of column writing that appears in the national press, and perhaps that isn't very good. However, he had not really paid very close attention to the one or two about Humphrey and ABM that I had thrown in the pile. He quite possibly does already see too much of that kind of thing that they would not be striking enough to attract his attention. It occurred to me to suggest a compromise approach, that I intersperse several weeks of dealing with each one of a number of diverse questions with a constant recurrence to the theme of human variation, but again do that two or three weeks at a time, and that probably does make pretty good sense. If my main purpose was to sell one or a set of programs I would undoubtedly follow this advice without hesitation. I sometimes feel that I have both a more personal and a broader purpose in mind.

Among the biological items he was somewhat shaken by my references to clonal reproduction. These, he said, were the only articles where he felt that there was a certain non-human and excessively scientific (like thermonuclear war-con) orientation in the writing. I did explain that I was approaching this issue very gingerly, anticipating that kind of reaction, but that in fact I felt that it was just the one that had to be taken so seriously as to be the most important justification for entering into this task of public education. He used Milton Friedman's example of the negative income tax as an idea that starts out very, very strange, but by being talked about sufficiently eventually becomes familiar enough that it can be dealt with on a more rational basis. This phenomenon itself is perhaps worth writing about.

He strongly agreed with my own perception that the way in which columns influence opinion is (1) by sensitizing readers to issues he has not thought about before so that he will start gathering his own data and reaching his own conclusions; (2) by providing slogans and cocktail party talk that maintains interest in a given area, and (3) by providing arguments that help to reinforce positions that the reader already has.

The advantage of the newspaper as a medium of communication is that more than any other it presents new material for thoughtful consideration without the reader having first gone out of his way to pick it out, as would be the case for magazines and books. It is a kind of imposed browsing that gives access to people's attention in a rather unique way. On the other hand, people are not going to look very closely at discussions of material that they are not already rather keen about, so that it is just those questions that are not in the day-to-day news that will need the most redundancy of treatment. This is why it is not surprising that there have not been in the last few years many commentaries about the issues of nuclear strategy; there was nothing to peg them on. I have to comment that of course one may wish to initiate a new issue via a column, but in order to do that one really must start a campaign. One can't stop at just a single article, or one incidental commentary.

In light of the above, it probably is of no use whatsoever to attempt to sway Congressional opinion by denouncing what Congress does. It may be possible to mobilize a wider public reaction to play on Congress by a sufficiently consistent campaign. An isolated article bemoaning what has happened here or there is probably totally ineffectual, except as a kind of symbolic expurgation of one's own feelings on the matter. However, writing <sup>that</sup> does seem to offer some way out, some compromise, some higher synthesis that is still compatible with the defense of the past and with the individual self-respect of the individual Congressmen may be useful to try to contrive. Direct head-on criticism is of very limited value. In a sense this is what some of the editorials that were written in response to the meeting of the New York Academy of Sciences about cuts in scientific funding were trying to say.

Rivers did inquire what impact this kind of preoccupation would have on research. I had to answer that those motives would have to have an outlet somewhere, and that one like this was probably the most constructive and the most systematic.

We both agreed that the column would make most sense if it reflected some fairly coherent program, that there was some set of views that I could be identified with, since I was making out a commentary, and I will have to do some work myself to try to analyze what those views are. The nearest thing to a programmatic statement that I can think of would be my articles on technological disharmony, and the one of January 6, 1968; perhaps even more pointedly the one of November 4, 1967. That's like saying "Keep trying to understand and support science", which is not a trivial idea, but homing in a bit more massively on some more readily perceivable issues may be much more effective.

Our conversation closed with his remarks about being invited to join the section of the new Presidential commission on violence that has to do with the role of mass communications. He has just completed a revision of Wilbur Schramm's book on Responsibility in Mass Communication.. My own view is that he is making a much more important contribution by that route than any he could take on the commission. Schramm is evidently quite critical of serving on such a commission. My only caution to him was being chopped up in the meat grinder between the President and the industry, a matter that came out quite pointedly at the Asilomar conference. I urged him to contact the psychiatrists here who have their own study of violence going.

My book will undoubtedly have a more visible logic to it than any reader can get out of the disparate collection of articles. If I talk about nuclear war I should give particular and explicit emphasis as to why I am choosing such a subject for my column. It should hardly be necessary to explain such a thing, but it helps to be explicit.